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By **L. DEBENHAM.**

Author of "Lucky Legacy," "Babes in the Wood," "Ten Dancing Princesses," "Our Betty," etc., etc.

FOR SIX FEMALE CHARACTERS.

CHARACTERS:

Miss JEMIMA JENKINS, a Rich Spinster.

ANGELINA GUBBINS } Sisters.
 CLARISSA GUBBINS }

MARY WILLIAMS } Sisters.
 CECILY WILLIAMS }

PEGGY PENROSE, an Orphan.

(All Nieces to Miss Jenkins.)

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NOTE.—If a well-trained dog cannot take Poppet's part, a stuffed or cloth dog will answer the purpose, if well managed.

SCENE.—Miss JEMIMA JENKINS' *drawing-room, arranged primly and in old-fashioned style. Table, C. ; piano, L.C. ; chairs, and couch draped with patchwork quilt. ANGELINA discovered, as curtain rises, strumming on piano ; CLARISSA lying on couch, reading yellow book ; MARY leaning lazily back in chair, hands clasped behind head, work in lap ; CECILY looking idly out of window.*

CLARISSA (*sitting up and closing book with a bang*).—Do stop that awful strumming, Angy! If Aunt Jemima hears, *you'll* have no chance of getting into her good graces, I promise you. Deaf as she really is, she'd be able to hear enough to drive her out of her seven senses. You've a touch like a sledge-hammer, I declare. The din has made my poor head ache.

ANGELINA (*shutting piano with a bang and twirling round on music stool, irritably*).—You do well to say "My poor head!" There's nothing in it but those silly novels you are read—read—reading from morn to night, unless Aunt Jemima's about; then you hide them under the sofa cushion or any. where. You're not likely to get into the old woman's good books, that's certain.

CLARISSA (*angrily*).—And, pray, how can you tell, Miss Spitfire?

MARY (*sitting upright*).—Oh, girls! girls! How you do quarrell! It gets on my nerves and makes me feel I don't know how. Here we all are, invited by Aunt Jemima to spend a week with her. Of course we all know what for. She is trying to find out which of us she likes best, and probably which of us she will make her heir—or heiress, I suppose, is the right word. Everybody says she is tremendously rich, though you wouldn't think it to see this room—(*looks round her*)—and the careful way she lives. She certainly doesn't spend much in ornamenting her house, or herself. But I mean to do my very best to please her, and will get round her if I can, for I should love to be rich. Money would be very useful to me and Cissy, I can tell you, for we don't get much by dressmaking, and never shall; we're not industrious enough. I hate work, and so does Cissy. Let's be friends, though we're rivals. Of course we'll all try our

very best to win the prize, though I for one should loathe to be boxed up in this dull house, and have to be polite all the while to Aunt Jemima.

CLARISSA.—And so should I.

CECILY.—So should I, but I mean to try to please her, all the same, for the sake of her money.

ANGELINA.—Of course. The game's worth the candle, as the saying goes. How I dislike that little brute of a dog of Aunt Jemima's, don't you?

CECILY.—Rather! Horrid little beast! I always give him a sly kick under the table when I get the chance without being caught. Odious fat tning!

ANGELINA (*laughing*).—Oh, I say! Suppose Aunt Jim heard us!

CLARISSA.—I can tell you one thing, Peggy's out of the running. She's so stupid, with no more tact than a stick! Says just what she means, and Aunt Jemima dislikes her already, I can see. (*Listens.*) Look out, girls! The old lady's coming! (*General stir.* ANGELINA *seizes some work from a side table, sits down hurriedly, and pretends to work*; CLARISSA *hides book under sofa cushion, seizes work, and sits very erect*; MARY *begins stitching busily*; CECILY *leaves window and sits down at table, opening book upside down, appears to read.*)

[*Enter Miss JEMIMA, leaning on stick and leading fat dog in chain, or carrying on her arm. She sits down stiffly in chair near table, C.*]

Miss JEMIMA.—Oh! my poor back! You young ladies don't know what it is to have rheumatism yet. But you will if you live to my age, and long before, I expect. I thought I heard a great shuffling as I came up the stairs, but you all seem very industrious.

ANGELINA.—It must have been the wind, aunt. It has been blowing quite strong.

Miss J. (*doubtfully, looking over her spectacles at the girls*).—I never heard the wind play "Washington Post," but, of course, there's no knowing what it may do. I like to see girls making themselves useful. They are not taught to work in these days as they were when I was young, worse luck. (*Pats dog.*) Poor Poppet! He's not well to-day, I'm sure, poor dear. Poppet's the only creature who cares a bit for me, I believe, cross old woman that I am.

ALL TOGETHER.—Oh, don't say that, aunt! I'm sure we all care—very much, indeed.

Miss J. (*shaking her head*).—Ah, well! We shall see—we shall see, my dears! Now I'm going out with Poppet for a little walk. Who will come with me?

ANGELINA.—Do let me come, aunt!

CLARISSA.—And me! I should love to come.

MARY.—So should I!

CECILY.—And I!

Miss J. (*aside*).—I wonder if they really mean what they say? It's more than doubtful. How am I to find out, that's the question? (*Aloud.*) It can't be much pleasure for young girls like you to come with me and walk my pace. (*Looking round.*) Where's Peggy?

ANGELINA.—Gone out somewhere for a walk, aunt. She came in with her hat on two hours ago and said she must get out into the fresh air, for she felt stifled with all the windows and doors shut.

Miss J. (*angrily*).—Stifled, indeed! So she wants to alter the arrangements of my house, does she? Rather premature, I think.

MARY.—She asked us to go with her, but, of course, we wouldn't think of doing such a thing without your leave.

Miss J. (*aside*).—Very proper indeed. But is it genuine, I wonder? Are they trying to humbug me? However am I to find out? (*Aloud.*) I certainly don't approve of young girls gallivanting all over the country by themselves. I'm old-fashioned, no doubt, but I'm too old now to change. It's not respectable, to my mind.

MARY.—Of course not, aunt. It's the last thing Cissy and I would do, I assure you.

ANGELINA.—I shouldn't think of such a thing.

CLARISSA.—Nor I, indeed.

Miss J. (*aside*).—They're almost too proper, I'm afraid. Overdoing it a little, I fancy. However am I to find out? (*Singing heard outside. Aloud.*) What unseemly noise is that? (*Singing stops.*)

[*Enter PEGGY, L.C., her hat in one hand, a bunch of wild flowers in the other; hair partly down. She advances, C.*]

Miss J. (*staring at her stonily*).—Miss Peggy Penrose, may I enquire where you have been?

PEGGY (*gaily*).—Certainly, aunt, only I'm afraid I can't tell you. I was sick of stopping in the house, so I've been a jolly long walk—a real good scramble over the hills and far away. Look at these! (*Holds up flowers.*) Aren't they lovely? What a pity you haven't been out; it's just splendid up the hill. I nearly lost my hat. It did blow so! Poor old thing! (*Holds it up.*) I haven't improved it, I'm afraid. It's a sin and a shame to stop in this stuffy room when—

Miss J. (*horrified*).—Stuffy room, Miss Peggy! You call my drawing-room stuffy?

PEGGY (*laughing*).—I'm sure I beg your pardon, aunt. But don't you know there's such a belief nowadays in fresh

air? Fresh air cures all the ills under the sun, or so it's said. Only out-of-date people box up their doors and windows.

Miss J.—You talk too fast for me, Miss Peggy. I won't stand being dictated to by a chit of a girl in my own house, not I! Open-air treatment is nothing but fads and fiddlesticks. I'd like to hear a doctor prescribe open-air treatment for me! He'd soon be out in the open air, I can tell you. (*Rises painfully and stands C., trembling with anger.*) If you find me so out of date, and my house so stuffy, I think it's a pity you should remain longer in it. I should be sorry to keep any visitor who is dissatisfied, so I think you had better pack your things and go to-morrow.

PEGGY.—I'm very sorry to have said anything to annoy you, aunt. But, to tell you the truth, I'm so used to an open-air life, that I feel like a wild bird caged if I'm kept in a stuff—in a house anywhere all day. So I'll pack up my traps and go back to my typewriting to-morrow. You see, I get an hour off in the morning, and I've always done work at five o'clock, so I have plenty of time for outing.

Miss J. (*turning her back on PEGGY*).—Very well, Miss Peggy, that's settled. (*To the others.*) Will either of you come a stupid, slow walk with an old woman?

ANGELINA (*jumping up eagerly*).—Do let me come, dear aunt! I should love to.

MARY.—So should I!

CLARISSA.—Let me come too, aunt!

CECILY.—And me! (*They all surround Miss JEMIMA, except PEGGY, who stands L.C.*)

PEGGY (*aside*).—It's no good five girls going, and I can't tell fibs just to get into aunt's good graces, and what's more, I won't!

Miss J.—Will Mary and Angelina come with me? I want to go to the draper's over the way. There's a veterinary surgeon staying there. He's the draper's brother, and I want to speak to him about Poppet, for I'm afraid there's something wrong with his eyes; and I want to buy something at the shop as well. Will you girls have tea ready when we come back? Mind the kettle boils, and have the muffins nice and hot.

CURTAIN—SUPPOSED INTERVAL OF AN HOUR.

As curtain rises CLARISSA and CECILY are discovered laying teacloth on table, C.

[Enter PEGGY, carrying tray, on which are teacups, etc., which she places on table. Exit PEGGY, L.C.]

CLARISSA.—It's nearly tea time. They'll be back directly, I expect.

[Re-enter PEGGY, L.C., carrying tray with muffins, cake, bread and butter, and jam sandwiches, which they arrange on table.]

CLARISSA.—I've had a jolly run out at the back door and down the road, ever so far, and feel all the better for it. I don't know how I could exist in the awful dullness of this house, even if Aunt Jim promised me all her money. Still, it's worth trying for.

CECILY.—I do think she's the most trying old woman! So prim and particular, and always worrying about something or other.

PEGGY (*angrily, stopping C. with dish in hand*).—Well, all I can say is, that's it's nasty and sneaking to talk about poor old Aunt Jemima like that behind her back, and toady to her when she's here, as all you girls do, just for the sake of

getting her paltry money. I'd scorn to do such a thing, that I would; and I'm glad I'm going away to-morrow, for I couldn't stand by and see an old lady humbugged and deceived. No, not for anything you could give me!

CLARISSA (*laughing sneeringly*).—You are a queer girl, Peggy! I'm afraid you're not a favourite with Aunt Jemima, in spite of your noble sentiments!

PEGGY.—I'd much rather not be a favourite, if her favour is to be gained in the way you girls are gaining it.

CECILY (*examining cake on table*).—Aunt Jim's very fond of cake, so I thought I should please her if I made one all myself, but the stupid thing came out of the oven as black as my shoe at the top, and I've had to sugar it over ever so thick to hide the burn. I hope she won't find it out.

CLARISSA.—I've toasted the muffins. I'm very glad Aunt Jim's fond of muffins, because I like them so much myself.

PEGGY.—And I've cut some thin bread and butter, and made these jam sandwiches. I'm as hungry as a hunter, I can tell you, after that jolly breeze on the hill.

CECILY (*laughing*).—Wasn't Aunt Jim angry about that walk? She is particular, and no mistake. Fancy objecting to a girl taking a walk by herself nowadays!

PEGGY.—Ah, well, she's very kind at heart all the same. You want to understand her a bit, I expect.

CECILY (*laughing*).—She makes us understand her sometimes, doesn't she? You are a funny girl, Peggy!

PEGGY (*calmly*).—I dare say I am. Now—(*looking critically at table*)—I consider that's a nice-looking tea, don't you?

CECILY.—Yes, I do. I hear them coming back, so we're just ready in time.

PEGGY.—I'll run for the teapot. (*Exit, L.C.*)

[*Enter Miss JEMIMA, ANGELINA, and MARY, their hats and cloaks off. Re-enter PEGGY, L.C., with teapot and hot-water jug.*]

CLARISSA.—Tea's quite ready, auntie. But where's Poppet?

Miss J.—Poor dear Poppet! I've been obliged to leave him shut up in the back parlour at the draper's, behind the shop. Mr. Brown expects his brother in half an hour, and he promised to take the greatest care of Poppet and bring him over presently. (*Sits down wearily at table.*) How tired I am! Ah! I get very tired nowadays, my dears. I'm a very old woman, and can't expect—— But, come, it's no use worrying. Give me a cup of tea. I hope the water really boils? (*Business of tea. All the girls except PEGGY wait assiduously on Miss JEMIMA.*)

CECILY (*handing Miss JEMIMA some cake*).—I know you like cake, auntie, dear, and so I made this for you. Do taste it.

Miss J.—Thank you, my dear. Just a small piece. I'm afraid of rich cake.

CECILY.—I don't think it's too rich, auntie. Do try it.

CLARISSA.—I toasted some muffins for you, aunt. I know you like muffins. Now please have some.

Miss J.—My dears, you'll make me ill among you; I can see that plain enough. But you're very attentive, I'm sure, and it's nice to be waited on at my age. (*To PEGGY, who sits quietly at table.*) I suppose you are tired with your long walk, Miss Peggy?

PEGGY (*cheerfully*).—Oh, no, thank you, aunt; not at all. But I think four girls waiting on one person is enough at a time, don't you?

Miss J. (*coldly*).—Perhaps so. (*After carefully dusting crumbs from her dress.*) No more, thank you, my dears. I have something to say to you. I expect you all know well enough (though, of course, you won't confess it) why I asked you all to stay a week with me? I'm getting a very old woman, as I said just now, and want somebody—a relation, not a hired servant—who will really care a little for me and come to live with me altogether. I wonder which of you girls would care to remain with a cross, invalid old woman in this dull house, for I know it must be dull and stupid for young people, and look after me in my old age?

ANGELINA (*eagerly, clasping her hands*).—Oh! I should love to live with you, auntie! Indeed I should!

MARY (*excitedly*).—So should I, dear aunt!

CLARISSA (*eagerly*).—Let me live with you, dear auntie!

CECILY.—Do let me, Aunt Jemima!

Miss J. (*looking at PEGGY*).—Does Peggy say anything?

PEGGY (*hesitatingly*).—I should like to think it over a little before—— (*Bell heard ringing loudly.*)

Miss J. (*starting*).—Hark! Listen! (*Bell rings again.*) I've not heard that sound for years. It's the fire-bell! Last time it rang two or three houses were burnt to the ground before the engine arrived. Where can the fire be, I wonder? (*The girls cluster round the window, except PEGGY, who stands a little apart, L.*)

ANGELINA (*excitedly*).—I see smoke rising, and flames! Look! Look!

Miss J. (*goes to window and looks out*).—Give me my glasses! Ah! here they are. It is—it is—at Brown the drapers, where we were this afternoon. (*PEGGY goes out quietly, L.C.*) Oh! poor man! I hope it will soon be stopped. Brown is such a civil, industrious person, and has such a nice wife and several small children.

MARY.—Look how the flames are rising! How horrid! I wouldn't be there for anything.

ANGELINA—I'm awfully frightened at a fire. It's fun to see one from a distance, though, where's there no danger.

CECILY.—I like to see it from a distance, too; it's so exciting.

Miss J. (*suddenly clasping her hands and dropping her stick*).—Oh, I quite forgot! How could I? My poor Poppet, shut up in Brown's back parlour! I left him there! Oh! my poor dear little dog! Nobody will think of him, of course! My faithful, affectionate little friend. What a terrible end! (*Sinks down in a chair, C., and bursts into tears.*)

CECILY (*aside to ANGELINA*).—Wouldn't it be a good rid-dance! (*Aloud.*) Oh, how sad! Poor, poor Poppet! (*Footsteps heard outside, door is flung open.*)

[*Re-enter PEGGY, L.C., with POPPET in her arms, her hair disordered, her face blackened, her dress torn, one sleeve rent, showing her bare arm and wrist discoloured. She throws POPPET into Miss JEMIMA'S lap, then staggers and sinks into chair, nearly fainting.*]

Miss J. (*hysterically*).—Poppet! Safe and sound! My dear little Poppet! And, Peggy—Peggy! What has happened? Child, your clothes smell of fire, your arm is hurt, and your face scorched. Quick, girls! Get the Eau de Cologne. There, on the mantelpiece! And some water—give her some water, quick! (*Girls rush about aimlessly, with different things from the table. Miss JEMIMA bathes PEGGY'S forehead with Eau de Cologne, and gives her water.*) You dear, brave girl! You risked your life in that burning house to save my little Poppet! And I thought you so care-

less and—— Are you better, my dear? Drink a little more water, it will refresh you. (*PEGGY sits up, pushes her hair from her face, drinks a little more water.*)

PEGGY.—There! I'm all right now, aunt. Don't be frightened. I didn't quite know where I was for a minute or two, and felt a bit queer, that's all. There's really nothing the matter.

Miss J. (*half crying*).—Nothing the matter? Look at your poor arm!

PEGGY (*laughing*).—Please, don't look at it, aunt, if it makes you uncomfortable. There's nothing to make a fuss about. I knew you were very fond of Poppet, and I hate animals to suffer, so I just ran in and got him out. The poor little beast was so frightened I could hardly hold him.

Miss J.—You dear, brave girl! I'll send at once for the doctor, and you shall have the burns properly attended to. You're a noble—— (*Sobs.*)

PEGGY.—Please, don't auntie! You've been very kind to me, and though I can't and won't tell fibs and humbug you, of course I'd do anything for you I could, and as I'm going away to-morrow, I'd like to know that you won't think unkindly of me when I'm gone, but——

Miss J. (*interrupting*).—Unkindly! My dear, you've made me ashamed of my harsh judgment and old woman's blindness. If you'll only forgive my cross words, and try to make yourself happy with a stupid old woman as long as she lives, and perhaps learn to love her a little, in spite of her disagreeableness, she will always try to remember that she's old and you're young, and you will want plenty of open-air life and amusements, and young companions. What has happened this afternoon has decided me, my dears. (*To the other girls.*) You have all been very kind and attentive to me dur-

ing the past week, and I'm very much obliged to you for waiting on an old woman and giving up your time to her as you have done. I must freely confess that until what has happened showed me what a thoughtful, brave, unselfish girl Peggy is, I was quite at a loss to decide which of you I should invite to remain with me permanently. But from what I have seen this afternoon, I feel sure that I—and Poppet—will get on extremely well with Peggy, if she will consent to make her home with us and look after us both. What do you say, Peggy?

PEGGY.—Dear auntie! How good of you! Of course I shall be very glad. I've had no real home since father and mother died. But—— (*Hesitating and looking at her cousins.*)

Miss J. (*taking PEGGY's hand, C.*).—I know what you mean, my dear, and I like you all the better for thinking of your cousins. They must come and stay with us when they feel inclined, and they may depend that their old aunt won't forget that they are her nieces, too. But if you—(*to PEGGY*)—will promise to remain with me altogether, I've quite made up my mind to adopt as my daughter, “Only Peggy.”

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